

Service-Learning and the Downsizing of Democracy: Learning Our Way Out

Christopher J. Koliba
University of Vermont

Does service-learning contribute to the privatizing or downsizing of citizenship practices, a claim recently leveled by Crenson and Ginsberg (2002), or can service-learning be understood and practiced as a vital antidote to this troubling trend? The author revisits a theme often raised within the service-learning and civic education literature regarding the relationship between service-learning and citizenship development, particularly, the apolitical nature of most service activities and student outcomes. By asserting the importance of intentionality and transparency, the author claims that service-learning activities find their value to citizenship development when: space is created for political dialogue; the nature of service is deconstructed; a community assets outlook is adopted; students are asked to refine their perspective-taking skills; and service-learning is understood within a broader movement of institutional reform.

What is the value of service-learning to citizenship development? This question has interested practitioners, academics, and educational leaders since the early beginnings of the service-learning movement (Stanton, Giles, & Cruz, 1999), and continues on into today (most recently in the Carnegie Report on the Civic Mission of Schools, 2003). Academics have examined this relationship as a part of their research agendas (Eyler & Giles, 1999; Westheimer & Kahne, 2003) and theoretical exhortations (Barber, 1992; Batistoni, 1997; Putnam, 2001; Westheimer & Kahne, 1999). Despite this body of work, service-learning continues to be criticized as contributing to an essentially privatized notion of citizenship (Boyte, 2003; Crenson & Ginsberg, 2003), an argument that has received increased visibility with the publishing of Crenson and Ginsberg's book, *Downsizing Democracy: How America Sidelined Its Citizens and Privatized Its Public*. Although Crenson and Ginsberg's mention of service-learning is brief, it is situated within the context of an extremely powerful, if flawed, exploration of the citizen's place and purpose within the current American political system. Essentially, their assertion is that as service-learning is practiced in schools, colleges, and universities, it contributes to what is perceived to be a shift in how citizenship—or more specifically our societal expectations of citizen action—is understood and promoted. This shift has led to the “downsizing” or “privatizing” of citizen functions. Assertions about the relationship between service-learning and what some perceive to be troubling trends in democracy and citizen roles are not new.

Harry Boyte (2003) has been rendering this argument for several decades now.

This article seeks to present a response to Crenson and Ginsberg's (2002) and Boyte's (2003) assertions about the place and purpose of service-learning within the context of citizenship development. Beginning with an overview of the former authors' critique, I will draw upon the recent distinctions that Westheimer and Kahne (2003) have made regarding the relationship between service-learning projects and certain citizenship outcomes. Deconstructing their citizenship typology, I will assert that service-learning should best be conceived of as a set of practices and principles that provide students and community partners with the tools for participation, even if it does less to inspire actual political action than many of its practitioners hope and aspire to. Rather than refute Crenson and Ginsberg's and Boyte's claims, I assert that their concerns call on service-learning practitioners to become more transparent and intentional with their work if the link between service-learning and citizenship development is to be fully realized.

The “Downsizing Democracy” Argument

Citizens' place and purpose in civil society has been the subject of much debate and discussion, fueled in large part by political scientist Robert Putnam's (2000) “Bowling Alone” hypothesis, which has focused attention on the relative decline of civic participation in the United States in recent decades. It was Alexis de Toqueville (1956) who, benefiting from the lens of a societal outsider, observed and celebrated the associational character of the American polity. The classical view of par-

participatory democracy that has emerged situates voluntary associations as the proverbial grease for the engines of democracy—serving as spaces where citizens meet to discuss and formulate opinions about public issues, and ultimately organizing to exert influence over the political system. Putnam amasses a multitude of statistics to support his argument that American civil society is suffering from severe citizen disengagement. He places the onus of this decline on the citizens themselves, blaming, among other things, changing work patterns (more women entering the workforce) and increased television viewing as the sources for this decline.

Like Putnam (2000), Crenson and Ginsberg (2002) are concerned about declining citizen participation. However, they radically depart from Putnam in citing the cause. “The era of the citizen is now coming to an end,” they write in the early pages of their book, adding:

Today, Western governments have found ways of raising armies, collecting taxes, and administering programs that do not require much involvement on the part of ordinary citizens. Despite the nation’s initial democratic exceptionalism, contemporary political elites have substantially marginalized the American mass electorate and have come to rely more and more on the courts and the bureaucracy to get what they want. (p. x)

Distinguishing “personal democracy” from “popular democracy,” Crenson and Ginsberg explore how public policy decisions and public administrative systems have evolved into “new techniques of governing,” that “disaggregate the public into a collection of private citizens,” leading them to experience democracy as an increasingly personal rather than collective enterprise (p. x).

Political reforms designed to increase citizen participation in governance have resulted in citizens acting alone, as individuals, to access governmental mechanisms. “Twentieth-century political reforms have given citizens unprecedented access to the political process,” they write, adding,

The introduction of primary elections, the use of referendum and recall, sunshine laws, legislative mandates requiring agencies to give public notice and hold public hearings before policy changes—all would seem to have made the government more responsive to citizens than ever before. But the new opportunities for citizen involvement have changed the nature of citizenship itself. The proliferation of opportunities for individual access to government has substantially reduced the incentives for collective mobilization. (Crenson & Ginsberg, 2002, pp. 2-3)

Greater access to government has allowed Americans, “to get what they want on their own, without hitching their interests to coalitions of like-minded fellow citizens” (p. 3). With the growing tendency to treat citizens as “customers,” government agencies are retooling their services to place an emphasis on customer service—individualizing the point of contact, thereby empowering the individual citizen, and doing away with the need for citizens to engage in collective action. The scope of the citizen-turned-customer’s dilemmas becomes personalized.

Not only can citizens-turned-customers access government directly; special interest groups, created to serve collective concerns, do not need to rely on mass mobilization to exert political influence. Throughout the subsequent chapters of their book, Crenson and Ginsberg (2002) examine how the focus of the American political system has shifted, from mass mobilization to special interest groups that do not need to rely on a large constituency to exact influence. A new generation of “policy entrepreneurs” and “private attorney generals” has evolved, skilled in gaining access to policy makers and manipulating the judicial system to influence public policy outcomes. As a case in point, the authors cite the Civil Rights Movement, which evolved from a mass mobilization of citizens intent on expanding the rights and privileges of marginalized groups to the narrowed sphere of affirmative action, a policy initiative that has shifted focus to the litigation process. Within the environmental movement, large associations such as the Sierra Club and the National Wildlife Foundation are membership organizations that generally only require their constituencies to contribute money to support their cause, allowing citizens to delegate policy battles to professionals who have the skills and access to influence change.

As a student of public administrative history, it is difficult to argue with the authors’ assertions regarding the personalizing and essentially privatizing effects that the expansion of access to government and the rise of policy entrepreneurs have wrought on authentic citizen participation. However, the major flaw with this argument lies in Crenson and Ginsberg’s (2002) solution to this problem: continued insistence on the need for a political elite to mobilize citizens for collective action. At the heart of this hypothesis is the dictum that collective action exists at the behest of elites. Citing a lack of “spontaneous collective action” in modern American history, the authors recall an era when politicians needed their constituencies’ mass mobilization to exert influence. “Citizens become politically engaged because states and political elites need them and mobilize them,” claim

Crenson and Ginsberg, adding, “If citizens remain passive, politically indifferent, or preoccupied with private concerns, the reason may be that our political order no longer provides incentives for collective participation in politics...” (p. 14). Crenson and Ginsberg fail to return to the origins of their own hypothesis—that it is the evolution of institutional structures that has led to the privatization and downsizing of democracy, a point I will return to later when I discuss the relationship between service-learning and institutional reform.

The influence of the consumer market on common perceptions of the polis has been well documented, most notably in the literature regarding the relationship between public and private sector administration (Allison, 1997; Moe, 1987). Within the context of citizenship development, Harry Boyte has done an excellent job of raising the specter of the citizen-turned-consumer (1987), and the citizen-turned-care-giver (2003). In one of his most recent pieces exploring these themes written for the *Cambridge Journal of Education*, Boyte reasserts his concerns about the emphasis on “personalized caring giving” that serves as the dominant model of citizenship used by many well intentioned advocates of communitarianism and other neo-liberal worldviews. He asserts that, “Civic education in communitarian terms takes the form of service or service-learning courses, aimed at teaching values, such as responsibility and care for others, to young people” (2003, p. 88). Although Crenson and Ginsberg (2002) do not make explicit references to Boyte’s work, they do align themselves very closely with his arguments. In an effort to explore the extent to which service-learning does contribute to the downsizing of democracy, I need to explain their concerns in some detail.

Crenson & Ginsberg’s Claim About Service-Learning

Researchers have found that education is a strong predictor of civic engagement (Almond & Verba, 1989; Berman, 1997), even though they may not be sure just how education leads to a commitment to engagement. Education may be considered as a proxy for social class, which in turn may serve as an indicator of an individual’s propensity to associate with others. Formal education can also provide students with opportunities to acquire the skills necessary for engagement: communication, organizational, and other interpersonal skills, for example. There exists little doubt, then, that education—and by implication the institutions responsible for education in this country—play a crucial role in preparing students for active engagement in political life.

Crenson and Ginsberg (2002) recognize this, citing the important role that schools, colleges, and universities play in the “making of modern citizens.” Recalling the authors’ claim that the modern citizen is a decidedly more private citizen than his/her counterparts of past eras, the authors draw attention to the changing nature of “civic education” offered within schools over the last several decades.

Consider, for example, the recent transformation of civic education in American public schools. Civic education’s purpose is to teach young people a common set of political ideals and beliefs and to habituate them to the rules of conduct that govern public life in a democracy. Promoting good citizenship was one of the purposes for which public schools were originally created in this country. The not-so-hidden curriculum used to concentrate on preparing students for collective political action, especially the electoral process. Students held elections to choose team captains, class officers, and student government representatives... (p. 6)

Research shows that providing students with opportunities to make meaningful decisions (e.g., having their votes lead to the election of a class officer) can be a crucial component in their development as active and engaged citizens (Almond & Verba, 1989; Berman, 1997). Indeed, the hidden or latent curriculum rooted within a school, college, or university culture is perhaps more important than the manifest curriculum in promoting socially responsible attitudes and beliefs. Crenson and Ginsberg appear to be on the right track when they draw attention to the importance of the cultural and essentially experiential characteristics of an education.

Crenson and Ginsberg (2002) proceed to critique how service-learning differs from more direct experiences with the political process, claiming that within American schools, “there is a pronounced shift from the electoral exercises to ‘student service learning,’” citing Maryland and other states’ efforts to make service-learning a requirement for high school graduation (p. 6). They go on to add,

Traditional civic education tried to teach students that they could help to govern the country along with their fellow citizens just as they governed their classrooms, teams, and schools with their fellow students. Service learning imparts a fundamentally different set of lessons about citizenship. Citizenship is no longer about the collective activity of governing. Students are urged to produce the public services that a voting public once demanded from its government, frequently services that

government has abandoned or is not prepared to pay for. Lessons in service have supplanted training for sovereignty. (p. 6)

Those familiar with the literature on civic engagement and student development will recognize these trends: incoming first-year college students are less likely to follow politics than their counterparts some 30 years ago. Yet, first-year students are more likely to have engaged in community service before entering college (Astin, 1998). This data tends to support Crenson and Ginsberg's (2002) assertions. Social scientist David Wagner (2000) offers this explanation:

Today's younger generation of activists, human service workers, and volunteers has seen no major radical movements in two decades and consequently has come to mistake the missionary zeal of service work with politics. For neophytes, the constant assertion that nonprofit social service agencies are somehow 'political' reinforces the mistaking of bureaucratic organizations for social movements. The new generations do yearn for some meaningful activity. But the absence of large-scale social and political movement as well as the influence of elder siblings and the media has made the idea of volunteering with the homeless, with Habitat for Humanity, with people who have AIDs, or with battered women about the most 'radical' thing a person can do. (pp. 168-169)

Wagner (2000), like Putnam (2001), is placing responsibility for this shift of interest from politics to service squarely on the shoulders of individuals. Crenson and Ginsberg (2002) suggest otherwise. They assert that the responsibility for this shift in interest lies with, among others, educational institutions pushing for service requirements, thereby validating the importance of direct service above collective political action.

The authors write of the "service contract" that exists in these circumstances, noting how the new political order is leading to the devolution or redirection of service provision, from government to the nonprofit and private sectors. The service contract, they assert, is one of the "key mechanisms for transforming social movements from independent adversaries of the state to collaborators" (Aronowitz, 1996, p. 133). "In the process," they add, "citizens are transformed into volunteers or customers" (Crenson & Ginsberg, 2002, p. 226).

On the surface, it would appear that Crenson and Ginsberg (2002) have a point. Performing service is a fundamentally different activity than engaging in political action. These tensions have been raised within the literature before (Boyte, 1991). Judging from Crenson and Ginsberg's assessment, however,

it appears as though, like Boyte, they fail to make any distinction between community service and service-learning. It appears that in their eyes, they are one in the same.

Merely writing off Crenson and Ginsberg's (2003) and Boyte's (1991) critique of service-learning as simply a case of misunderstanding, however, would be wrong. Despite the professed differences between service-learning and community service, the nature of the service contract remains intact, inevitably leading to the question: could it be that service-learning educators need to revisit the terminology by rethinking the very notion of "service" itself?

Over the years, Boyte and his colleagues have repeatedly cited the need for rethinking the service contract by calling for a new emphasis on "public work" (Boyte & Skelton, 1997). By characterizing civic education as either "civics" or "service," Boyte links these frameworks to classical liberalism and communitarianism, respectively. By shifting the discussion from service to politics, a "populist politics" no less, Boyte attempts to politicize what he sees as an essentially apolitical service movement.

Keith Morton (1995) addresses this issue by unpacking the various forms that service can take: charity, project, and social change. Acknowledging the level of integrity that practitioners within each of these service paradigms exert, as well as coming to grips with students' individualism, Morton explores how service can be understood within the context of "thick" and "thin" perspectives. Borrowing the thick/thin metaphor from anthropologist Clifford Geertz (1973), Morton renders a sophisticated analysis of service and the service contract that Crenson and Ginsberg (2002), and Boyte (1991) fail to recognize.

It is the matter of explicit outcomes for students, communities, and the educational institutions that sponsor and support these activities that distinguishes service-learning from community service or "volunteerism." Using the thick/thin analogy of Geertz (1973) and Morton (1995), community service work, devoid of formal reflection, is a decidedly "thin" application of service in which the unspoken, yet implied, principle of personalized caregiving is reinforced. Thus, the downsizing of democracy is, indeed, supported through community service.

Thinking about this matter of outcomes again recalls Boyte's (2003) longstanding dispute with service-learning, specifically his charge of its apolitical leanings. It is within this context that Boyte's call for a form of "democratic populism" is rendered. Writing for an international audience, Boyte asserts:

In the USA, populist politics in democratic

form has been tied to a 'productive' notion of citizenship and politics. Focusing on citizenship as work with public meanings and public outcomes is different than seeing citizen action as a struggle over scarce resources. It also differs from the highly personalized and apolitical quality of much 'service.' People can work together on common problems or things of broad public benefit despite sharp disagreement on issues of distributive justice, questions of rights, or formal political and philosophical belief, and learn a great deal about power, politics, and structures in which they live in the process. (p. 96)

Note that he revisits his longstanding distinction between citizenship as "public work" and service, while asserting that people can still accomplish things collectively for the common good without agreeing on the underlying values—both political and philosophical—that are dictating these actions. He cites as an example of public work a project that his center has sponsored in which students overcame neighborhood opposition, negotiated with the city, and raised funds for the creation of a much needed playground (2003, p. 94). Service-learning educators are left wondering how, if at all, this particular project differs from service-learning? Does changing the name of this activity from service to public work alter the essence of the act? And what about the role of politics? If people can engage in collective action together without fundamental agreement on the underlying values dictating the action, does this lead to apolitical action? Boyte fails to deconstruct these relationships much further. However, a recent contribution to the service-learning and civic engagement literature has lent a great deal to this discussion.

Aligning Projects with Specific Citizenship Outcomes

Joel Westheimer and Joseph Kahne (1996; 1999) have repeatedly addressed the relationship between service-learning and citizenship development, most recently in the featured article in the *Campus Compact Reader* (2003). In this article they lay out a framework involving three genres of citizenship: the personally responsible citizen, the participatory citizen, and the justice-oriented citizen. By juxtaposing the personally responsible citizen against the other two models—one focusing on the Deweyan and Jeffersonian model of engaged citizens, the other focusing on citizens as social activists—Westheimer and Kahne's framework provides a useful tool from which to assess student-learning outcomes. Their understanding of the "personally responsible citizen" aligns very close-

ly with the personalized or privatized notion of citizenship (Boyte, 2003; Crenson & Ginsberg, 2002). However, Westheimer and Kahne assert that reinforcing personalized notions of citizenship is not an inevitable outcome of service-learning, as others suggest. Service-learning practitioners can help students more deeply understand their assumptions about service and the role citizens need to play within a popular democracy by being mindful of the model of citizenship toward which a service-learning project is oriented. Westheimer and Kahne assert that the nature of the service-learning project helps inform students about their roles as citizens. They share vignettes of two service-learning projects. The Madison County Youth in Public Service project is aligned with a participatory-oriented perspective on citizenship. The Bayside Students for Justice project is aligned with a justice-oriented perspective on citizenship.

By laying out these distinctions between types of service-learning projects, Westheimer and Kahne (2003) remind us that no one monolithic genre of service-learning project exists. Not all projects necessarily reinforce the detrimental aspects of the service contract. They assert that service-learning projects can expose students to more participatory-and/or justice-oriented understandings of citizenship. These activities move beyond direct service, assisting others in gaining knowledge about themselves and their communities (e.g., participatory action research projects), or support the development and organization of collectivized and empowered voices (e.g., supporting the work of a local neighborhood association). Some projects seek to provide knowledge and information to ordinary citizens, to assist them in making informed decisions (Koliba, 1998a).

The proper role of politics within the service-learning experience remains an enduring question. If social justice projects are an important means to question social structures, won't these projects only attract students with a predisposition toward social justice? If a project with a social justice orientation is required for students, should those with political views opposing the project have to participate?

These questions beg an entire set of other, more fundamental questions: When is it appropriate to politicize our teaching practices? At what point in a person's development is she or he able to make decisions for herself or himself? This may not be a problem for politically-active students, but what about those that are not? What about those that have been socialized in apathy or cynicism? How do educators give them the skills of "empowerment" and "democratic organizing for cultural changes in government," as Boyte (2003) has sug-

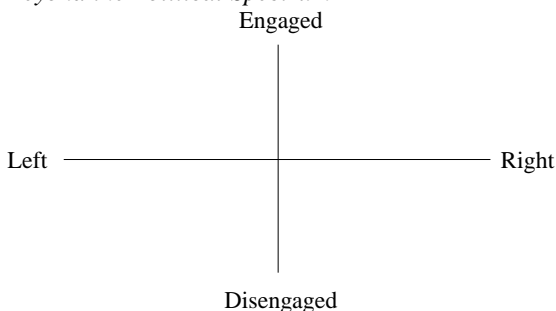
gested, if they have not internalized these goals for themselves?

These questions raise the very difficult question of the place and purpose of politics and political ideology in the classroom. The very mention of the term “power” or “politics” may be problematic for those who feel there is no legitimate place to raise this for their class’ examination. There is little wonder, then, why Westheimer and Kahne (2003) assert that most service-learning projects do enforce a notion of citizenship focused on personal responsibility. Because service-learning practitioners cannot come to some agreement on political values, they are attracted to the common denominator: service as a charitable act that enforces personal responsibility over collective action.

For some, this is just how it should be. Others, who do see a downsized democracy as a problem, are caught in a profound double bind. How do service-learning practitioners craft projects that are ideologically inclusive for everyone, while this very need “downsizes” the kind of citizenship that can be professed? If a Deweyan notion of education as democracy is to be realized, students must be allowed to formulate their own opinions, and have those opinions valued. This, in my mind, lies at the heart of cultivating an active, participatory notion of citizenship as a goal or objective of the learning process. Anyone with experience at the neighborhood, grassroots level realizes that getting along with neighbors is at least as strong an imperative as having ideological values fulfilled.

How then, can service-learning practices be elevated above this double bind? I believe the answer lies at the center of Westheimer and Kahne’s (2003) typology. Service-learning practitioners need to begin to articulate a set of meta-civic goals that transcend the traditional left-right political spectrum.

Figure 1
Beyond the Political Spectrum



Rather than expect students to adhere to one set of political ideologies or another, service-learning practitioners need to look toward the vertical axis—the “engaged-disengaged” spectrum. The rights to

collective action are not the bastion of any one political orientation. Both the political left and political right have benefited from mass mobilization (e.g., Civil Rights and Pro-Life Movements) as well as the downsizing trends cited by Crenson and Ginsberg (2002) (e.g., the use of the courts to alter policy). Perhaps the ultimate outcome for those who find privatizing trends problematic is not the overthrow of these trends, but in bringing them into balance with collective action by allowing for a variety of forms of civic expression to take root. Thus, participation can take the form of becoming a policy entrepreneur, private attorney general, or organizing mass mobilization for collective action. Educators cannot determine which path along this road students should take. However, educators can ensure they possess the tools, the “public leadership skills” for which Boyte calls (2003).

To develop such skills, it is essential that students are informed about the kinds of concerns being raised about service-learning. If we, as educators, struggle with the kinds of tensions outlined in this article, why not share this struggle with our students? I argue for adopting five pedagogical practices for all service-learning practitioners. I believe these are applicable regardless of the type of service being rendered or the academic discipline to which the service is being applied. These practices are: (a) creating a safe space for “political talk” within the classroom, (b) problematizing the notion of service itself, (c) reinforcing a community assets perspective, (d) encouraging, through formal reflection, perspective-taking and the “thickening” of student experiences, and (e) conveying the relationship between service-learning and wider institutional reform. These practices, among undoubtedly others, lend to a process of using ongoing reflection to “learn our way out” of the current dilemmas posed by the service contract.

The phrase “learning our way out” is borrowed from adult education theorist Matthias Finger (1994), who originally coined it in an attempt to describe the role that adult education needs to play within the context of the environmental crisis. For Finger, if people’s overly consumptive lifestyles contribute to the environmental crisis, they must come to a deeper understanding of their ecological imprint via reflection on the reciprocal relationship that humans have with the Earth. As adult learners, the world’s citizens must internalize their understanding and appreciation of this reciprocal relationship to the extent to which they change the way they make decisions and live their lives.

Translating Finger’s (1994) hypothesis to the growing trends toward a downsized, personalized democracy suggested by Crenson and Ginsberg

(2002) recognizes the place and purpose that this same reciprocity and reflection—this time turned inward toward people's relationships to each other within the polis—plays in “learning our way out” of the current crisis. If service-learning is to be understood and practiced as a pedagogical movement bent on teaching and inculcating students with public leadership skills, it needs to intentionally and transparently draw upon the principles of reciprocity and reflection. By taking an adult learner perspective—whose theoretical roots in Dewey (1916), Lindeman (1926), Lewin (1964), Freire (1989), and Horton (1998) are rich with associations between education and democracy—service-learning practitioners need to develop a sense of trust in students and their community partners to comprehend the very issues discussed in this article. Turning to ways in which practitioners can support this process of learning our way out, the theoretical framework guiding these suggestions should be intimately familiar to seasoned service-learning practitioners. It is asserted that the synthesis of reciprocity and reflection will stimulate students (and their community partners) to understand themselves as “thickly” engaged citizens.

The following five suggestions should be construed as interplay between genuinely reciprocal relationships and effective reflection. This synthesis is the first point regarding the need to create a space for “political talk” within the classroom. For effective reflection to unfold, students must feel there is a supportive space to honestly and openly express their thoughts, feelings, and analysis. This space requires establishing reciprocal relationships among and between students, and the educator who exerts a certain modicum of power over them. The persistence of enacting power over can be recognized in the nature of server-served relationship, requiring the deconstruction of the very essence of “service” itself. The essence of reciprocal relationships is perhaps best embodied in one of the core tenets of the service-learning field: the community assets or community strengths perspective. Students must be asked within the formal reflection process to focus upon their roles and recognize the richness of their observations, all the while acknowledging the limitations of their experiences to adequately express the full range of perspectives. Broadening the perspective to an institutional level turns the attention to the evolving relationship between educational institutions and local communities. Such a shift from the traditional “ivory tower,” “town-gown” outlook to a community-engagement orientation requires a shift in perspective by educational leaders, educators, and students. Through service-learning, students are

placed on the front line, street-level of these evolving relationships. No doubt, others will be able to identify other ways to enact this interplay between reflection and reciprocity.

Creating a Space for “Political Talk”

A major challenge facing service-learning practitioners concerns how to expose students to a specific political action without violating their rights to genuine self-determination of their own ideological values. At the heart of this matter is the concern that students may be expected to parrot back their instructor's values and beliefs—conservative, liberal, or progressive—to please the instructor and get a good grade. Paulo Freire (1989) called this part of the “banking concept of education.” Personal experiences and beliefs certainly have a place in the classroom, as bell hooks has articulated (1994). Decoupling political ideology from formal grading/assessment is crucial. If an educator is to share his or her political convictions overtly or covertly, then the power differential between teacher and student must be recognized, even if never completely leveled.

When thinking about classroom practices, a space must be created for all to voice their political opinions. Whenever there is a service-learning component to a course that I teach, my students and I try to lay the groundwork for an authentic dialogue that incorporates our oftentimes diverse political perspectives to safely emerge by sharing past experiences with political dialogue. When asked about how and with whom my students talk about politics, several kinds of responses inevitably surface. Some only speak about their political views with people of like-mindedness; others seek out diverse opinions and enjoy “mixing it up;” still others report on how they rarely speak about politics because it is not worth the angst of entering into potential conflict. As a class we set out to create a set of “norms of communication” by which all can abide. Although we always start with a blank page, some norms almost always emerge: avoiding personal attacks; agreeing to disagree; watching our air time; and engaging in active listening. By making the rules of engagement explicit or transparent, we all learn a lesson in public leadership. Assuring the class that when I speak of my political values I do not expect the students to parrot my values back to me, we are then freer to speak openly, and the extent to which the service-learning projects being undertaken by the class contain underlying political biases. By agreeing upon a set of norms at the outset, we collectively create a space where reciprocity as a value is honored. A microcosm of the polis or commons is created.

Problematizing the Notion of Service

As idyllic as the classroom polis may be, rest assured, it is often replete with many of the same tensions that arise within the polis. One such tension is a sense of power over (as opposed to with) others, particularly within the context of the traditional service contract of the relationship between the “server” and “served.” A space for free and open discussion makes it possible to ensure students do not blindly enter into the traditional orientation toward service, by helping them to deconstruct the concept itself very early on in the process. I can think of no better reading to accomplish this than Ivan Illich’s (1990) “To Hell with Good Intentions.” Illich’s iconoclastic diatribe against the actions of well intended, nonetheless naive, service providers can be a powerful tool to assist students in deconstructing the nature of the server and served relationship. If students enter into a service-learning experience lacking an appreciation for reciprocity, then the notion of the personally responsible citizen is implicitly encouraged by presenting the community need as an individual one, calling for the immediate attention of the service provider to ameliorate the problem.

Having students read the Illich (1990) article may help them come to terms with their own intentions. Being asked to consider their intentions, students may “thicken” their understanding of the service contract, and at least sit comfortably with this tension.

A Community Assets Focus

In addition to contributing to the downsizing of democracy, an accompanying unintended consequence of a service-learning project may be to reinforce stereotypical images of a community stifled with “deficits.” Recall that the citizenship paradigm of personal responsibility is grounded in a conservative understanding of the root of social problems: the individual is personally responsible for his or her fate. A community deficit outlook looks upon poorer communities as comprised of personally irresponsible individuals who, with the helping hand of a charitable caregiver, can lift themselves up by their bootstraps.

A counter to some of these thinly rendered observations can be found within John Kretzmann and John McNight’s (1993) “community assets” approach. The fundamental assumption of this perspective is that individuals collectively form the basis of communities that possess powerful assets or strengths that can aid them in their efforts toward self-determination. Introducing student service-learners to the community assets approach requires them to consider communities of need, and the

individuals that comprise them, as empowered actors capable of addressing their own problems. This teaches students the virtues of public leadership. When students are asked to say or write something about an empowered person they encountered at their service site, they will often describe an inspirational community leader. A community assets approach rooted in the principle of reciprocity encourages students to view the community being served as an invaluable environment in which to learn. To access this learning environment requires the application of vital public leadership skills either directly (through neighborhood organizing for instance) or indirectly (by bearing witness to a role model within the community).

This reciprocity should extend back to the community as well. A problem, however, arises when the impacts of a service-learning project on the community are not clearly understood or documented. The lack of research on the community impact of service-learning should be a central concern to those promoting service-learning as a counterforce to the trends of civic disengagement (Cruz & Giles, 2000). A deeper understanding of community outcomes will better position educators to understand whether a service-learning experience serves as a surrogate for service provision. The results of students’ work with social service agency clients, for example, should be critically assessed. We need to ask the hard question of what criteria do we use to render this assessment? Kretzmann and McNight’s (1993) “community assets” perspective is of great importance here. With this lens, a service-learning experience can be assessed in terms of the extent to which it empowers communities to act on their own behalf, presumably through collective action. This requires community agency collaborators to confront a very troubling dilemma: their good works may, in the long run, be causing more harm than good, in part, because it leads to privatizing notions of citizenship.

The community assets approach and critique of the traditional perspective embodied within it, bears some significant implications for many professional practices. In *The Careless Society: Community and Its Counterparts*, McKnight (1995) explores the extent to which the professions of social work, medicine and the law may be disempowering their constituencies, clients, patients, etc., by forcing them to rely on others’ expert authority. Service-learning experiences can provide extremely important lessons to preprofessional/preservice students regarding potential negative impacts of their good intentions. This reliance on professional expertise has also contributed to the downsizing of democracy. By internalizing a com-

munity assets perspective, students and community partners alike are provided an opportunity to envision themselves as active, engaged participants, rather than passive consumers of services.

Using Formal Reflection to Stimulate Student Perspective-Taking

Getting students to internalize a community assets or strengths approach requires them to possess some of the key traits of public leadership and social responsibility (Berman, 1997): the ability to engage in perspective-taking, critical thinking, and problem-solving. Service-learning provides an opportunity for students to come into contact with real people whom they often would not normally encounter. Sometimes these encounters with “others” are foreign and strange to them, and may cause students to retreat to a comfort zone wherein they formulate their opinions and outlooks quickly, perhaps even leading to reinforced stereotypes. These encounters with different others can serve to solidify differences and create distances between “us” and “them,” further isolating and privatizing their notions of citizenship.

Service-learning educators are challenged to help students modulate the authority of their past experiences. While it is desirable for students to see their service-learning experiences as “texts” (Morton, 1996) from which to learn, they need to understand the limitations of their community experiences, as well. This aspect of their community-based learning may, in the long run, be a most important learning outcome.

When asking students to reflect on the limitations of their experiences, I have drawn upon qualitative research as an analogy. Qualitative researchers are asked to comprehend the limitations of their experiential authority. They are asked to respond to such questions as, How generalizable are my observations? When and where is my personal bias affecting what I see and hear? Qualitative researchers seek validity and reliability in their work. They often employ peer audits and triangulate their sources to substantiate the analysis of a given situation (Bogdan & Taylor, 1975). Quality reflection has much in common with these aspects of qualitative research.

In borrowing Geertz’s (1973) understanding of thin and thick description to the analysis of service, Morton (1996) provides a useful link between qualitative research skills and outlooks and formal reflection. Students may be asked to adopt some of these skills of observation and analysis through “thick” reflection (Koliba, 1998b).

I introduce the concept of thin and thick descrip-

tion to service-learning students by asking them to write a “thin” description of the room in which we are sitting (Koliba, 1998b). They share observations: four walls, x number of chairs, x number of people, placement of windows, etc. I then ask them to write a “thick” description of the room. The descriptions inevitably become richer and more nuanced. They may discuss the function of the room, go into great depth describing the origins of a given object in the room, describe what might be happening within the minds of the people presently sitting in the room, etc. I find that it is very easy for them to grasp the thin/thick distinctions.

An envisioning exercise I ask students to do is to revisit an experience they had as a stranger to a foreign country or any new setting, such as a party at which they knew no one, a new part of town they had only just visited, etc. Students share experiences of heightened perception in which all is new to them. With this fresh perspective, they speak of recognizing details that, once they became acclimated to the setting, would fade into the background. I then help them to draw parallels to their service-learning setting and ask them to keep attuned to this fresh, “observer” outlook.

These exercises help students be mindful of their roles as perspective-takers and critical analysts of experiences. By adopting the mindfulness of a qualitative researcher, students then have an opportunity to think about the limits of their experiences and more importantly, the analysis of their experiences. We are then, as a class, allowed to consider what perspectives may be left out of our assertions, particularly the perspectives of traditionally marginalized groups.

In translating these skills of observation to the realm of public leadership, perspective-taking aids in critical-thinking and problem-solving capacities, skills that passive, privatized citizens may lack. When acting alone, focusing on one’s own necessarily limited perspective, privatized, downsized citizens do not have to think systemically and extend their interests beyond the self to the “common good.”

A Focus on Institutional Reform

Students can be helped to think systemically by placing their actions as service-learners within the context of institutional reform. The proliferation of service-learning practices within schools, colleges, and universities is an opportunity for educational institutions to reflect on their quintessentially public and reciprocal relationship to the local community, and by necessity, the larger society. The late Ernest Boyer’s (1990) calls for “engaged scholarship” turned educational leaders’ attention to the importance of community (in all its various incar-

nations), to the endeavor of education and learning. The community engagement movement taking place within schools, colleges, and universities across the country is requiring these institutions to take a deeper, more reflective look at themselves. These institutions are, of necessity, developing a deeper understanding of their roles as (small “c”) corporate citizens to pursue a genuine community engagement agenda.

The challenge for service-learning practitioners is to bring this paradigmatic shift into focus for students. Posing questions such as, “what is the civic mission of this school, college, or university?” and “what is the public purpose of the field of knowledge presently under study?” is essential to transforming service-learning into a set of practices that encourages individual and institutional engagement for the common good. By raising these questions, students are then able to situate their roles as front line, street-level representatives of their educational institutions to the larger community within the context of social change. Thus, appreciating the role of students as leaders within this shifting paradigm provides them with a sense of efficacy, or locus of control. They become active participants in the change process at the institutional level. What better opportunities exist for students to develop and evolve public leadership skills?

Students march to the beat of their own drums (Morton, 1995). Some will inevitably take advantage of the leadership opportunities within their grasp, while others will fail to do so, either because they are developmentally not ready, committed to achieving others goals, or simply do not have the drive or interest to think and act as engaged citizens. Educators can, however, strive to ensure that the formal reflection processes and concepts, such as reciprocity and perspective-taking, call on the students to at least think about these issues.

To prepare educators for the task at hand, I suggest that these practices be shared within the context of professional development opportunities for faculty and community partners. Having benefited from participating in, as well as facilitating, professional development opportunities relating to service-learning, I can attest to the power of bringing these themes to the forefront in the spirit of transparency and intentionality. Developing a set of norms regarding in-class communication, deconstructing the nature of service, introducing a community assets outlook to community partnership development, engaging in perspective-taking exercises, and discussing the practice of service-learning within the wider context of institutional reform has served as integral units of discussion in service-learning seminars at the University of Vermont and service-learning pedagogy courses I

have offered to teaching assistants.

These five practices serve as a pedagogical interplay between reciprocity and reflection, two of the pillars of service-learning practice. Their adoption assumes that students, community partners, and faculty are adult learners capable of using their exposure to service-learning as a vehicle for developing the kind of public leadership skills for which Boyte (2003) has called.

Conclusion: What is At Stake?

If the political order has shifted and citizens are not needed to play an active, collective role, what is the big deal? In the concluding chapter of their book, Crenson and Ginsberg (2002) take the reader through the following visualization exercise:

Imagine a society whose members no longer look for connections between their own interests and those of their neighbors, or become insensitive to the resonance between their own interests and those of their neighbors, or become insensitive to the resonance between their own aspirations and those of their fellow citizens. Imagine a country whose inhabitants see no reason to explain their hopes to one another, or to justify their anxieties...

They conclude, “That country may not remain imaginary any longer...” (p. 241).

The picture that Crenson and Ginsberg (2002) paint is one of declining social capital, in which social networks erode, trust in others is depleted, and the common bonds or norms that hold communities, neighborhoods, and nation-states together dissolve or evolve into societal structures that do not look nor act like participatory democracies.

For those who still believe in the democratic ideal, there is a great deal at stake, and Crenson and Ginsberg’s (2002) salient, if however flawed, critique of service-learning demands attention. For service-learning to play a positive role in balancing out the trends toward the privatization of citizen action, service-learning practitioners need to bring a certain measure of transparency and intentionality to their work. Through some of the activities outlined in this article, students, faculty, community partners, and educational administrators may be afforded opportunities to “learn our way out” of the current situation and create a culture of engagement that serves the best interests of a healthy, vibrant democratic society. Responsibility for the creation of such a culture of engagement rests squarely, although certainly not exclusively, on the shoulders of educational institutions and the people who bring them to life.

Note

The author thanks the editors of the MJCSL and their reviewers for extremely helpful feedback on early manifestations of this article, and expresses gratitude to the many students, community partners, and faculty who have borne the brunt of his enthusiasm for the ideas and practices outlined in this article.

References

- Allison, G.T. (1997). Public and private management: Are they fundamentally alike in all unimportant respects? In Shafritz J. M., & Hyde, A.C. (Eds.), *Classics of public administration* (4th ed.). Fort Worth, TX: Harcourt Brace.
- Almond, G. A., & Verba, S. (1989). *The civic culture: Political attitudes and democracy in five nations*. London: Sage Publications.
- Aronowitz, S. (1996). *The death and rebirth of American radicalism*. New York: Routledge.
- Astin, A. W. (1998). The changing American college student: Thirty-year trends, 1966-96. *Review of Higher Education*, 21(2), 115-135.
- Barber, B. (1992). *An aristocracy of everyone: The politics of education and the future of America*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Battistoni, R.M. (1997). Service-learning in a democratic society: Essential practices for K-12 programs. In R.C. Wade (Ed.), *Community service-learning: A guide to including service in the public school curriculum*. Albany, NY: SUNY Press.
- Berman, S. (1997). *Children's social consciousness and the development of social responsibility*. Albany, NY: SUNY Press.
- Bogdan, R. & Taylor, S.J. (1975). *Introduction to qualitative research methods: A phenomenological approach to the social sciences*. New York: Wiley.
- Boyer, E. (1990). *Campus life: In search of community*. Lawrenceville, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Boyte, H.C. (1987). *CommonWealth: A return to citizen politics*. New York: The Free Press.
- Boyte, H.C. (1991). Turning on youth to politics: Beyond community service. *The Nation*, 252(18), 626.
- Boyte, H.C. (2003). Civic education and the new American patriotism post- 9/11. *Cambridge Journal of Education*, 33(1), pp. 85-99.
- Boyte, H.C., & Skelton, N. (1997). The legacy of public work: Educating for citizenship. *Educational Leadership*, 54(5), 12-18.
- Carnegie Corporation. (2003). *The civic mission of schools*. New York: Carnegie Corporation.
- Crenson, M. A., & Ginsberg, B. (2002). *Downsizing democracy: How America sidelined its citizens and privatized its public*. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Cruz, N.L., & Giles, D.E. (2000). Where's the community in service-learning research? [Special issue]. *Michigan Journal of Community Service Learning*, Fall 2000, 28-34.
- Dewey, J. (1916). *Democracy and education: An introduction to the philosophy of education*. New York: The Macmillan Company.
- Eyler, J. & Giles, D.E. (1999). *Where's the learning in service-learning?* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Finger, M. (1994). From knowledge to action? Exploring the relationships between environmental experiences, learning, and behavior. *Journal of Social Issues*, 50(3), 141.
- Freire, P. (1989). *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. New York: Continuum.
- Geertz, C. (1973). *The interpretation of cultures*. New York: Basic Books.
- Horton, M. (1998). *The long haul: An autobiography*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Hooks, Bell. (1994). *Teaching to transgress: Education as the practice of freedom*. New York: Routledge.
- Illich, I. (1990). To hell with good intentions. In J.C. Kendall & Associates (Eds.), *Combining service and learning: A resource book for community and public service*, (pp. 314-320). Raleigh, NC: Society for Internships and Experiential Education.
- Kahne, J., & Westheimer, J. (1996). In the service of what? The politics of service learning. *Phi Delta Kappan*, 77(9), 592-599.
- Koliba, C. (1998a). Lessons in citizen forums and democratic decision-making: A service-learning case study. *Michigan Journal of Community Service Learning*, 75-85.
- Koliba, C. (1998b). *Citizens under every tree: Case studies in service-learning and civic education*. Ann Arbor, MI: UMI Dissertation Services.
- Kretzmann, J.P., & McNight, J.L. (1993). *Building communities from the inside out: A path toward finding and mobilizing a community's assets*. Chicago: ACTA Publications.
- Lewin, K. (1964). *Field theory in social science: Selected theoretical papers*. New York: Harper & Row.
- Lindeman, E.C. (1926). *The meaning of adult education*. New York: New Republic.
- McKnight, J. (1995). *The careless society: Community and its counterfeits*. New York: Basic Books.
- Morton, K. (1995). The irony of service: Charity, project and social change in service-learning. *Michigan Journal of Community Service-Learning*, Fall 1995, 19-32.
- Morton, K. (1996). Issues related to integrating service-learning into the curriculum. In Barbara Jacoby (Ed.), *Service-learning in higher education: Concepts and practices*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers.

- Putnam, R.D. (2000). *Bowling alone*. New York: Simon & Schuster.
- Putnam, R.D. (2001). Community-based social capital and educational performance. In D. Ravitch & J.P. Viterri (Eds.), *Making good citizens: Education and civil society*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Stanton, T.K., Giles, D.E., & Cruz, N.I. (1999). *Service-learning : A movement's pioneers reflect on its origins, practice, and future*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Tocqueville, A. (1956). *Democracy in America*. New York: Signet.
- Wagner, D. (2000). *What does love got to do with it? A critical look at American charity*. New York: New Press.
- Moe, R.C. (1987). Exploring the limits of privatization. *Public Administration Review*, 47, 453-60.
- Westheimer, J., & Kahne, J. (1999). Service learning as democratic action. *Educational Horizons*, 77(4), 186-193.
- Westheimer, J., & Kahne, J. (2003). *Political choices and educational goals*. Campus Compact Reader: Service-learning and civic education. Winter 2003.

Author

CHRISTOPHER KOLIBA is an assistant professor in the Community Development and Applied Economics Department at the University of Vermont. He teaches in and is codirector of the Master of Public Administration Program. He received his Ph.D. and MPA from the Maxwell School of Citizenship and Public Affairs at Syracuse University.